

Kempfi Oy

50 years of partnership between a man and a machine

Article

In the 1960s, it was clear that there was a demand for professional welders in Finland. Welder training lasted from two to three years and there was a huge shortage of professional workers. That is why Keijo Olkonieni, whose career as a welder has lasted for almost 50 years, trained to become a welder, a profession which has offered him challenges throughout his career.

Who?

Keijo Olkonieni

Welder

Born in Yli-li, Finland, in 1949

Lives in Nastola, Finland

Family includes wife and a son

Has lived in Singapore, Iraq, Saudi Arabia,

Sweden, Norway and Poland during his career

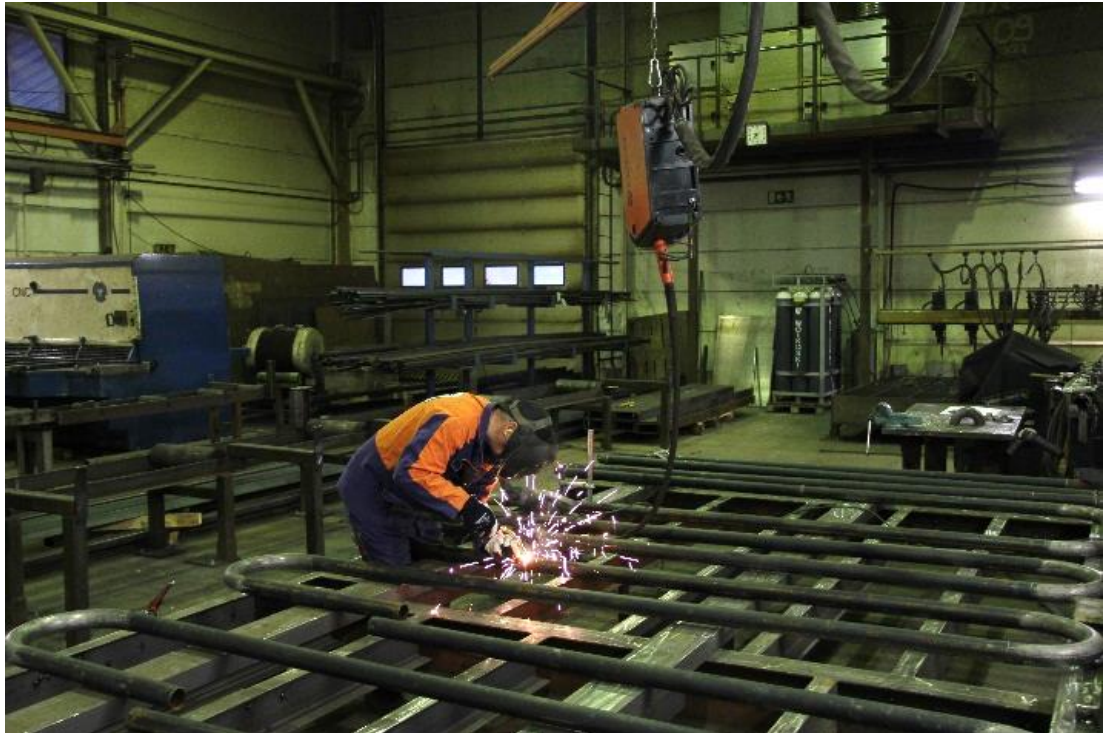
Growth from local to global

In the late 1960s, the young man finished his welder training and moved to southern Finland for work. There was work available in all Finnish growth centers: in Tampere, Helsinki and Lahti. "I remember when they said at the dockyard in Hietaniemi, Helsinki that you can bring me a train full of skillful employees, we will hire them all," Keijo Olkonieni says, laughing.



Already back then, Kemppi was a major employer in the Lahti area. However, Olkonieni ended up working in the domestic appliance industry and prepared molds and machines used in the manufacture of domestic appliances and a variety of pressure cookers and production lines.

The job allowed Olkonieni to take part in product development and gave him a chance to see all the things that can be involved in welding. At that time, he travelled around Finland installing products, and his first assignment abroad was to Jönköping, Sweden in the late 1970s. "Welding as a profession is so much more than just component manufacture and assembly into finished products. Finished products also have to be installed and that is something that not everyone can do," Olkonieni states.



Finnish quality work becomes more international

Gas welding machines were replaced with stick welding machines in the late 1970s. In the next decade, MIGs were already common and stick welding machines were only used in special cases. At that time, Olkonieni was working in the construction industry. "We manufactured concrete molds for the construction industry, and walls, for example, were cast into the molds."

The molds were brought to the construction sites and the walls were cast in position. At that time, molds and common requirements were not as strict as today. The walls that were cast in position were also plastered on site. Gradually, the business changed and instead of separate parts, the sales of entire factories began around the world – including installations.

Stricter quality requirements after mechanization

It was time to go abroad again. "In the mid-1980s, I was installing our products in a factory in Iraq and a second year in Singapore. Already at that time, the quality level in northern Europe was very high and we were known for that," Olkonieni says.

"We brought almost everything with us from safety devices to welding machines. There were no equivalent machines available in different countries, and good tools were a requirement for high quality."

At the same time, there was a lower tolerance for errors and even higher quality requirements. The products consisted of mechanized, very detailed parts with no errors, and the parts were identical. This trend has continued since the 1990s. With detailed parts, the welder's skills and the properties of the welding machine become essential – the seamless cooperation between a man and a machine.

Kemppi's innovations are shifting welding towards precision work

"I'm not sure if I would still work as a welder now after 50 years if there had been no development in machine safety and ergonomics over the years. Today, the noise is the only reason why the work is physically exhausting."

Olkoniemi applauds the evolution of welding equipment. "The machines have become more reliable, lighter and agile. Based on my experience, I can say that Kemppi has proven to be the most progressive and secure welding machine manufacturer."

"Today, welding machines are spectacular. They have improved the welding quality and efficiency. It's a significant advantage that the machines can remember the settings. Information travels between machines and even between continents. "

As a result of higher quality requirements, welding standards have been established. Olkoniemi's work has always been based on the client's demands and high-quality results, not so much on standards.

"Earlier, there was just a pile of iron on the backyard, they showed a drawing and said to do it like that. Now, the parts are often prefabricated and the drawings of the products are marked with the exact welding points, seam thicknesses and lengths. I trust that the standards have been taken into consideration during planning and I do my job as well as I can, following what is provided in the drawings."



“In the future, robotics and automation will become increasingly more popular in welding. When welding large series of products, automation will surely be effective. There can be, however, major differences in raw materials, parts and conditions. There will certainly still be demand for manual welding in product development, customized product solutions and small series of products.”



What have been the most memorable moments during your career?

“Personally, I think that stair molds into which stone stairs are cast have always been interesting to weld. The final product is quite complex since it includes a number of components and welding seams. It must be welded carefully, and the differences between the parts and the thermal expansion arising from multiple thick welding seams have to be taken into account. The work takes 500–600 hours of work and I have often done it independently. People can feel it if there is a one centimeter difference in the height of the stairs.”

“I’m soon going to retire from Elematic, but I probably won’t stop welding because I happen to have a stick welding machine in my garage. My advice for future welders is to be brave and take up challenges. Welding provides plenty of opportunities and diverse career paths. Being international has become the rule rather than the exception, and everyone can affect their own career path. Finland has a long welding tradition, the profession is changing but it’s not going to disappear. The number one welding machine manufacturer in the world comes from our country so we might as well have the best welders in the world.”